

Guest editorial

Social work in the face of war: a call for peace and social justice

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What is most troubling about an era is not only the violence it endures, but the violence to which it begins to grow accustomed. Few moral defeats are as grave as this. As of April 2026, the wars ravaging Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen and Syria, together with the offensive by the United States and Israel against Iran and the armed violence tearing Haiti apart, sketch a bleak map of devastation. All these conflicts point to the same moral failure, repeated under different names: the collective inability to protect human life where it falls under threat.

Faced with this outlook, social work does not cry out from the margins, but rather from the very core of its identity. Indeed, it arises wherever a society decides that human dignity cannot depend on force, money, origin, status or the power of some over others. It is recognised, in short, wherever each person is regarded as bearing inherent worth, where human rights are not a concession but a foundation, and where vulnerability does not diminish anyone, but calls for care, protection and shared responsibility.

On the basis of this conviction, it becomes clearer why war represents the most radical negation of what the profession is meant to embody and promote under conditions of normal coexistence. For this reason, social work is not suspended in the face of war, but is ethically compelled to respond, adapt and resist wherever violence has shattered the very ground of its principles. It understands that human life is sustained not only by physical survival, but by relationships, care and mutual recognition. Where war erupts, families are separated, communities fractured, and fear displaces trust. In this way, war destroys precisely what social work seeks to safeguard: coexistence, inclusion, protection, care and the very possibility of repairing wounded lives.

To speak of war from the standpoint of social work therefore requires more than shock. It demands ethical clarity to recognise that every war entails a violation of human rights and an extreme breach of social justice. Where people flee, where humanitarian aid fails to reach them, and where territory becomes uninhabitable, what is destroyed is not only immediate safety, but the possibility of a dignified life in common. For this very reason, social work cannot allow itself the luxury of indifferent neutrality in the face of unjust suffering.

Social work sees what the strategic language of many states tends to conceal: it sees the mother fleeing with her children, not knowing where she will sleep that night; it sees the child whose memory is marked by terror; it sees the woman exposed to violence or exploitation during displacement; it sees the older person who loses a home, a neighbourhood, a network and a shared history. And it also sees something decisive: that war does not end when the weapons fall silent. It continues in trauma, in suspended grief, in poverty, in stigmatisation and in the erosion of the social fabric.

Hence, the response of social work cannot be confined to emergency action. The profession must accompany, mediate, champion rights, repair harm, rebuild community and restore broken bonds. Its logic is not domination, but care; not force, but encounter. Thus, where war fragments, social work must recompose; where violence dehumanises, social work must restore humanity.

All of this makes the present moment a real test for social work. It is not enough to stand alongside those who suffer: we must engage with what their suffering reveals. It is not enough to heal wounds: we must bear witness to violated dignity. It is not enough to accompany suffering: we must denounce the structures that reproduce it and publicly uphold an ethic of dignity, rights, human connection, care and peace. From its very origins, social work did not emerge to observe devastation from a distance, but to stand on the side of dignity when it is violated.

In the face of war, therefore, it is not incumbent on us to be spectators. We must be a reparative presence alongside those who suffer, a critical conscience in the face of injustice, and an incorruptible voice in defence of peace. Today, more than ever, social work must rise again: on the side of human dignity, of care over force, of ethical speech over silence, and of peace with justice over resignation. This is not an optional stance; rather, it is a fundamental requirement of our professional identity.